

1981

# Jonnie Rankin: Revealing the unrecorded past of women in trade unions through the experience of one worker

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## **Suggested citation:**

Diamond, Sara (1981) Jonnie Rankin: Revealing the unrecorded past of women in trade unions through the experience of one worker. Fuse Magazine, 5 (8&9). pp. 252-256. ISSN 0838-603X  
Available at <http://openresearch.ocadu.ca/id/eprint/1808/>

# Jonnie Rankin

## Revealing the unrecorded past of women in trade unions through the experience of one worker.

In 1979, the Women's Labour History Project (Sara Diamond) began a series of oral history interviews with women activists in the 1930s and '40s. Presently these interviews are being developed into a book which will be published by Press Gang, a women's press in Vancouver. As well, Diamond has compiled a bibliography of women's labour history research sources in the provinces, also to be published by Press Gang, and is working on video productions on women's history and union involvement in the shipyards and wood industry.

Reclaiming our history as trade unionists is of immediate value to the current generation of working women if we are to build on past victories and not reproduce past mistakes. To this end, the Women's Labour History project began three years ago with the goal of documenting the history of B.C.'s labour women.

Nowhere in English Canada has the labour movement played such a visible role in shaping the political consciousness of the population as in British Columbia. Although much of the written labour history of the province represents these many individuals involved in the masculine personae, the reality is quite different. Women not only shared in the basic union and political struggles but lived through and contributed a different range of experiences than those of their male co-workers. Women were instrumental in organizing community support for strikes and unions, in fighting for housing, water health and school facilities through their union auxiliaries and unions, in organizing waitresses and domestic workers, in resisting sexual harassment on the job, in distributing illegal birth control, beginning childcare centres for the children of working women, organizing government workers, in resisting lay-offs and their own return to the kitchen after the war, in fighting to establish equal pay and later, job opportunities for both sexes and all races in the wood industry.

Despite women's many activities, the labour movement as a whole too often failed to adequately back up the women organizing in its midst. Male leaderships were at times threatened by vocal women. There was a lack of clarity as to women's legitimacy within the labour force in more conservative quarters. Women who played a central role in keeping their union on its feet often found themselves without

adequate time to push for "women's issues", as such.

### Women's invisible past

After spending many hours on documentary research into women's unionism in B.C., it became clear that it was necessary to return to the source for this history — to the women who shaped the events and processes. There were two reasons for this. Women were too often invisible in government, union and press documents, which reflected an official version of reality, often not encompassing the full range of activities of women even when they were mentioned. There was a hierarchy of concerns in relation to women's issues. For example, although Vancouver waitresses, who represent a permanent sector of working women, were very involved in organizing themselves during the war period, the newspapers focused almost exclusively on the entry of women into traditionally "male" jobs in industry and their probable (and generally hoped for) exodus after the war.

Documents tended to reduce the complex processes inside labour organizations to local and executive meetings, strike votes and debates between union and government officials. The daily experience of maintaining a trade union (especially in the days before dues check-offs and closed shops were established), the ways in which activists' consciousness developed and changed with conditions and participation in their union, could only be explored through discussions with the women themselves. The daily reality of women — the delicate balancing of home responsibilities, work and union activity; the conflicts, appeasements and shared struggles with husbands and children — appeared occasionally in the union press but emerged more fully in women's responses to concrete questions about their family life.

### In the shipyards

This interview features Jonnie Rankin, a union activist in B.C.'s wartime shipbuilding industry. By 1943, 1500 women worked as passergirls, welders, rivet heaters and in plate and bolt shops in the shipyards.\*

\*In this part of the ship building process the heaterboy heated the rivets and passed them to the bucker who threw them up to the passergirl who in turn passed them to the riveter.

Women entering these jobs confronted hostility from male co-workers. As the end of the war neared, male opinion on the women's right to remain in the industry's labour force divided into two camps: more conservative union leaders and rank and filers feared that women's presence in the industrial labour force would result in unemployment for veterans and themselves; progressive unionists argued that women had won equal pay and the right to equal job opportunities through their participation in the war effort. By 1944 shipbuilding contracts had fallen off. Massive lay-offs left women as well as the majority of men unemployed, concluding the debate.

The character of shipyard unionism changed during the war. Initially, the small labour force was organized into craft unions according to trade. Men were hired on as apprentices through the union, becoming journeymen at the completion of their training. Craft unions functioned as job trusts, excluding unskilled workers from the labour force. The expansion of the workforce, direct hiring through the National Selective Service and shipyard personnel offices and the introduction of unskilled and semi-skilled workers into the production process disoriented the craft union leadership. Young progressive unionists in the Boilermakers Union pressed for the federation of all of the trades and the unskilled into one industry-wide union. Women gravitated towards the Boilermakers union where they could participate equally. Not only did the craft leadership resist their loss of control in the yards but the Canadian Congress of Labour placed Boilermakers under trusteeship in order to break the extensive influence of its Communist (Labour Progressive Party) leadership. Nonetheless, a Federation did emerge by the end of the war.

Mr<sup>s</sup>. Rankin worked in the Burrard yards as a burner and a passergirl. She wrote a women's column for *Main Deck*, the Boilermakers' paper. She later worked as a waitress and organized for the Hotel and Restaurant Employees Union Local 28. After the war, she reported for *The People*, the Labour Progressive Party's paper. She then moved on to staff an International Woodworkers of America hiring hall. During the war years she worked on the creation of a community childcare centre and participated as an actress with the Labour Arts Guild. Mrs. Rankin presently resides in Vancouver.



courtesy Burrard Drydock Company Limited

**Jonnie Rankin:** At that time my name was Ottewell. I was married to Jack Ottewell, and I had three small children and I was about 25 years old in 1943 when women started going into the yards. I went in the shipyards because I needed the money. My husband and I were really sort of separating; we had one of those crazy teenage marriages and he didn't make much money, and I guess I needed a job and that's the first type of jobs that anybody saw for ten years was war — we got into the war industries. I went in with the second group of women that were hired in the Burrard drydocks.

**Sara Diamond:** It was obviously a big change for women to be in those kinds of industries.

**J.R.:** I think they needed our labour power that's all and it wasn't like a women's lib hiring, and so you start working and so they opened up but there was quite a lot of controversy from some of the men to work with the women, they had a terrible struggle with some of them. But we were hired anyway and we worked through.

**S.D.:** How was it advertised that there were jobs there for women, and how did they do the hiring? Was it through the union or how was it?

**J.R.:** Well, we just hired out in the hiring hall, I don't know. There was a woman who was the head of hiring women, did the interviewing and sort of had that department. There were two of them, but one in particular was quite a nice woman, and we just went in and were interviewed and they put us in different departments where they needed help and I got put in the sheet metal department at first.

**S.D.:** So, did you kind of go in there because you figured you would make good wages?

**J.R.:** No, there wasn't any choice. About good wages, I made 55 cents an hour and that was the minimum wage and that was what we were paid. No, we didn't have choice you see, what we had as wages. People came from all over the prairies (to work in the shipyards) because it was work.

**S.D.:** It was after the Depression . . .

**J.R.:** That's what brought it on. When they started producing for war, there was work, suddenly there was all this money for industry after the Depression when nobody worked any place, hardly. No, it's just that I got a chance of getting a job.

**S.D.:** So, how many women were there?

**J.R.:** Oh, I have no idea. Can't remember, there were a lot of us anyways, there must have been a thousand of us in there, it seemed like it.

**S.D.:** And were the women hired in groups?

**J.R.:** Yeah, we hired through this lady that I was telling you about, we went into a special office, and hired through there. And were assigned to different departments, wherever they needed so many women.

**S.D.:** What kind of training was there?

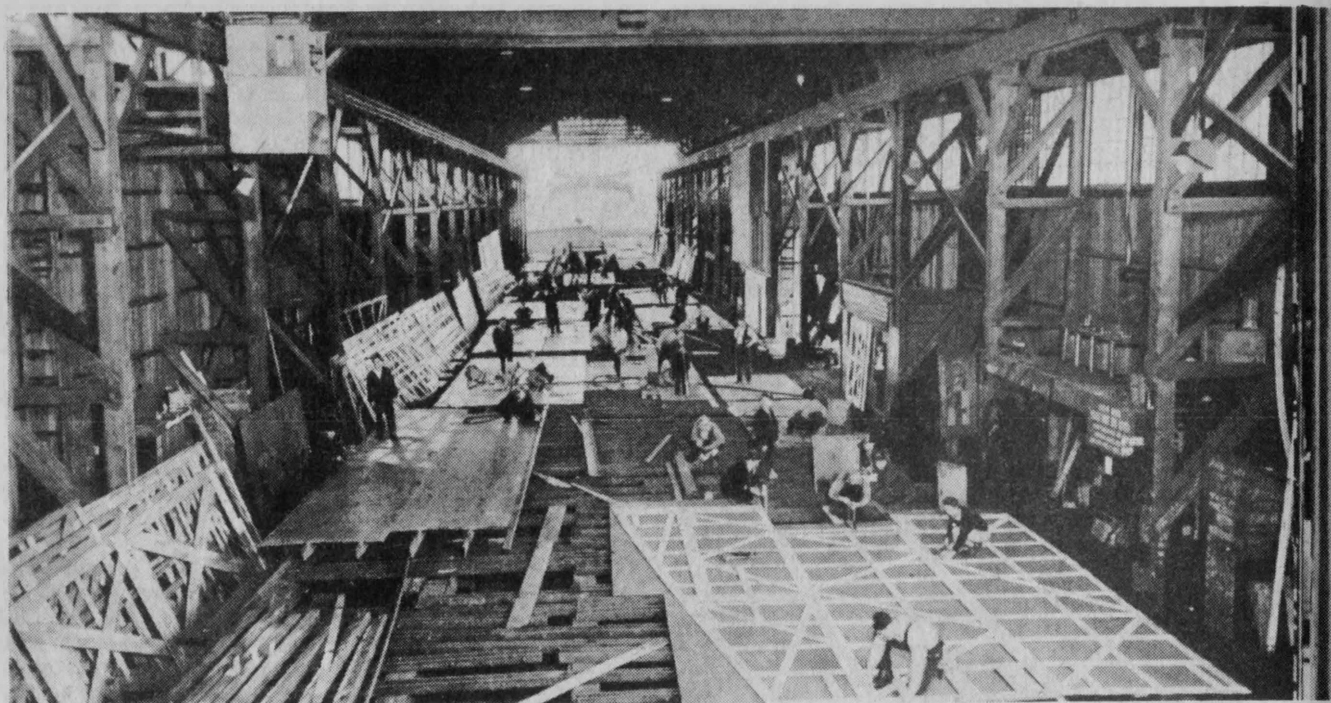
### "A different world then"

**J.R.:** No training, you just went in. If you'd been in the Depression and never worked, and then started raising kids at seventeen like I did, it was an entirely different world believe me when I went in the shipyards (laughs). I didn't know, none of us knew anything, half the men didn't either. We just worked. I was put out in the water on the boats right away. My job was with the sheet metal. First I worked with a fellow that was called Frank. He used to be embarrassed because my nickname's

Jonnie. We worked below the riveters and we used to put the cowvents (airshafts) in. He was a real old-fashioned sheet metal worker, a mechanic; very nice old guy and accepted women and was nice, so all the riveters used to say "Frankie and Jonnie" and he used to die over it, but he was a nice man. Then I got shifted over to Kenny Sherry, a Cockney. He told me a hundred times that he was born within the sound of the bells. He was a cute little guy but he didn't like to work with women; he was really snorty when I came up. And I said, well, here I am; you can take it or leave it. So we used to argue all the time about politics . . . neither one of us knew a damn thing. But I liked Kenny because he was temperamental, he was more suitable to me, we'd work hard one time and not the next. He put me on job — we worked out on the water and we had to hammer these screens around the cowvents then hammer things around them, and I couldn't hammer. I hammered my hand and mashed up the screen . . . I finally threw it across the deck. And he should have fired me, but he was an amateur psychologist so he said, "I understand your personality", so he had me all over the yard, burning (scrap) and I was all over the place. He was very nice.

**S.D.:** How was the work organized: was it an apprenticeship structure, like working with one guy?

**J.R.:** No. Most of us were just labourers. Women that were welders did go to training, you know, but I never went to that one. They had six weeks training, whatever the training was and a lot of them were welders, they did light welding and they took training. And I don't remember if there was any apprenticeship, but there might have been. I don't think any woman



Women at work in the Burrard shipyards: laying out an automatically welded deck panel on the skids of the prefabrication shop.

was ever an apprentice; they might have had boy apprentices because it was a craft union, and that's their system. But I don't think any women were apprentices.

**S.D:** Do you think that was because they didn't see the women working permanently in the industry?

**J.R:** Oh, yeah, yeah, they didn't see it. I was in that Sheet Metal Workers Union and they had to bring us in the union and we had to pay a dollar or something, and we had voice but no vote in that union.

**S.D:** How did they explain that to you?

**J.R:** That was just their rule, we complained about it. A lot of the workers felt that it was wrong, but that's the rule of that craft union.

When I worked with Kenny, we used to play tricks on each other. He was a hard worker but he didn't ask anybody to do anything that he wouldn't do. A lot of men would ask you to lift their 80 lb. tool kit because you're supposed to be a helper. I remember, one kid, Johnny something, his name was, he was young, he said "Pick it up", I said, "I'm not gonna pick it up, I'm not strong enough". And he said, "What're ya workin' for?" and I said, "You just get a jitney" (a truck used to transport workers on the job site). We had some real fights with some of them. Some of those girls tried to lug it, they thought they had to, but I was one of the fiery ones — I didn't. I just told them off. But Kenny never did that, he never asked us to do anything that he wouldn't do, and he never asked us to do things that we weren't physically capable of. But I was quite slim then, and we used to have these long cowvents, those are long tubes, they used to shove me down in there and bucked up small rivets, they're just little light rivets, with a little dolly they put on me, and I'd buck up inside, and then they'd haul me out again. So, one time, you know, they played a trick on me.

Everybody ate their lunch, and they sat there and threw me a cigarette in the vent. I sat in that vent all lunch hour yelling at them. So the next day Kenny was having his damned tea that he always used to have, so I got the welders to weld his lunchkit on the deck and he came for his tea and there he sat for his lunch hour — it was a half-hour that we had. So, he never left me in there again.

## Minding the children

When I got a job on the yard, I had a lady come and live with me, to look after my children, a Mrs. Stewart, and that's how I could work there. She had been working in Shaughnessy as a maid and she had a room downstairs. She got fifty dollars a month and her board. She said, "Jonnie, if you can get a job in the yards, I'll come and live with you for twenty-five dollars a month", because with me she was like part of the family. So that's how I could go, and she kept house and looked after my children for me.

**S.D:** There was no childcare at all then?

**J.R:** No, there wasn't. We were the first ones to start it, that was one of the things I wrote about (in *Main Deck*), and the things we got upset about, and the things everyone worried about: what to do with the kids.

**S.D:** How did you organize childcare?

**J.R:** Well, we didn't organize it, but we tried to. We worked at it, yeah, we worked at it. We were the first at that time, because that was a tremendous problem for us. And sometimes we had relatives, and sometimes the kids would just be left, you know, indiscriminately around, or they had to worry about when they came after school. I was fortunate that I had Mrs. Stewart come, otherwise, I just couldn't have gone. My boys were about 4, 5 and 6 — something like that anyways. Danny

was in school, so he must have been 6 or 7. But they were little. I had three in a row; I had three by the time I was 21, which I don't recommend for anybody, and then the Depression. Childcare was a big problem, and it was talked about all the time, because women worry all the time.

And I was on a committee, and I don't remember the name of the committee because it was too long ago, but on the committee that started Strathcona Day Nursery. That was the only one we had in Vancouver at the time down here on Powell and Cordoba. Later there was one in the West End too, in the community centre there. But they weren't started until after the War. We had been petitioning the government. We had Dorothy Steeves, (MLA for B.C. at the time) and she was a CCF (Cooperation Commonwealth Federation, the predecessor of the NDP) at that time, working with us. We had many committees, coming and going and petitioning and sending letters and delegations to the city hall and to Victoria to get funded for a daycare. But we didn't get it until after the War, and it was a terrible problem for women so women had to quit even though they badly needed the money. But they just couldn't leave the children.

And it's still a problem, it's almost bigger now because these little daycares have started all around, and then this government has cut off the funding for them. It costs women more to put the kid in the daycare than go to work. It's still a terrible problem. They talk about women having all this independence and careers. Somebody has to raise the kids, you can be brilliant, you still can't let the kid die. And there's very few men who are gonna take on that role, while the woman works. It's still your main job, and it's always been my main job, I always had to raise kids. But at that time I had Mrs. Stewart. When she left me — towards the end





Women found employment during wartime in the sheet metal shop at the shipyards.

when I was working as a passergirl, catching rivets at another shipyard — I got another lady, a Norwegian lady called Bobbi. She wasn't as good a housekeeper, but she was sweet with the kids. And I didn't care anyways; I was big and strong and could do it all. It didn't matter to me, I could do it at night, and do the shopping. As long as she was good with the kids I didn't care about anything else. So I was fortunate.

S.D: It must have been really difficult for women working at that kind of industrial job . . .

## A real education

J.R: I didn't feel tired; it was a whole education to me to go in those yards. I was about 25 years old and I had known nothing but, you know, just going to school or raising children, or struggling in a Depression. And I had already a lot of feelings, you know, about society. You don't live like that without getting a good idea that something was wrong someplace, and I . . . I was pretty left, too left, left-left you know . . . I hadn't related things together (as a strategy). When I went in the yards, it was just a whole total education to me because I had so many men talking to me about the struggles, the old Wobblies talked to me, then the organizers that were working and those that had helped organize the union, they started forming a union. And right at the very first the Marine-workers were trying to form a Federation and I got the idea of the CIO (Congress of Industrial Organizations) and industrial unions, and the importance of it. In those two years I got more of an education than you could get in three

colleges or universities; and understanding society, and understanding people.

S.D: You talked about getting an education in the shipyards, did the guys talk to the women a lot?

J.R: All the time. And we were in there, as soon as we went in we were accepted and pals. It was an education to them too — the ones that fought against it, like my little Kenny Sherry, when I got yellow jaundice and I had to leave Kenny cause I was quite sick. And, I said to him — I had tears in my eyes — now look Sherry, here you were the one that didn't want to work with women and you're crying when I leave. He says, "Well, Jonnie, in a million years you'll never make a mechanic, but you're more fun than anybody, so . . ." Then I went. No, no. We were very much accepted after they got used to the idea and they liked to work with women, and everybody learned something; it was an education. Women learned because we had to; you're so dependent all your life on the man's salary. It was a tremendous thing to earn your own money. And a lot of marriages broke up over it because she wasn't going to go back and ask any more. Many other ones were better because the man understood and she was more of a partner, so it was actually more than theory at that time. Besides being unemployed, men really controlled the purse strings and most families and women really had to beg for their cash; I did. I was supposed to be begging, I had a husband like that. But you never went back to that. Never. And when we used to get on those old street cars, we used to be filthy dirty. I worked in the deep tanks when I was a riveter and I was slimey. I used to hang off the back of the streetcar,

wouldn't even let me sit down on it. He'd say, "I can't understand why you like to do this". They couldn't understand that besides earning the money we were sort of buying back our self-respect. And that's something none of those men really understood, and I don't think they understand it today.

No, I didn't mind how dirty it was and how rough it was. I just felt great, and when I first was a passergirl going up that shell . . . my first day and they shoved this bucket in my hand and started throwing hot rivets at me, I was just terrified, absolutely terrified and I saw everybody else doing it and I thought "Oh God, you know I'll never make this", and the heaterboy — they pitched with 2 tongs, they pitched the rivets, and some of them are so good that they can lay them in that bucket, right up, I don't know how many feet, as high as this house, I don't know how many feet; it was high. This kid starts throwing to my face to scare me, and he sure did, and he scraped my cheek with this hot rivet, and I was down the ladder and after him, I was gonna kill him, you know, I thought I was scarred for life. And he ran. Anyways, they took me to the first-aid and they said, no, it's a surface burn, it will go away, so that kid kept out of my way for a long time. Then the riveter that I was working with said, "Jonnie, if you can't go up there don't worry about it because a lot of people can't and we'll get another job for you in the yard". He says, "You try it, but . . . if you're nervous, don't do it". Well, I went up and I was terrified, but I did it because I just couldn't go down again and face everybody. I stood it out and hung on to the bucker — you work with a bucker — and the next day I went up and I felt a little better and all of a sudden I wasn't afraid at all. And the bucker showed me how to catch, how to move my bucket, and I got so fast at it and so good at it that I was one of the first called when I walked in the yard, and that was the highest egoism I ever had, I would work any place.

## On piecework

But I did a wrong thing there too you see, how you learn! I used to like to work fast, and sometimes you'd work 2 passers and sometimes the other passer wouldn't show up, and I'd say, "Oh, I'll do it", because I was pretty fast, and I worked two passers, and then, they had this big thing going on, which at that time I didn't understand at all. They used to work for piecework, the riveters' gangs, the whole gang worked that way. Well the head guy, if he was in favour or he got the job, he'd get the whole surface, and he'd make quite a bit of money. And then some other person would do the pick-up, that's the rivets that's missed, and they'd maybe do 50 rivets and he'd do 5,000 or something, so they wanted to put it on wages, and not piecework, and I never did understand about piecework, until I went to the union. That was my first union meeting, I was at the Marine and Boilermakers Union, at that time, we'd changed unions and we could vote. In that

## JONNIE RANKIN

union, I had a vote. And, it was a much more progressive union, and not a craft union. And so I went to vote for piecework because I wanted to work fast up the shell, but boy, I tell you, I sat through the meeting, it was a Saturday and Sunday, and I went back on Sunday and I listened and I had a real education because some of those fellows that worked on heavy construction and had bad arms they told about piecework. They told about the profits the company made out of you, they told about everything, and so then I went out and I fought against piecework ever since, you know. Because I didn't know, but I went to all the meetings, and I sat right through them and listened and I was told how they formed the union, the basis of the union, and how they fought for and how hard they worked to keep this union and how they were fighting against piecework and contract work of any kind, and that we should have part of the profit of the whole, and not cut each other. And so on, and so on. So I don't know, so in 2 days I probably learned more than I'd learned in 20 years, someplace else. So I went out and fought hard against piecework, and that's why I'm sorry they lost the **Main Deck** because at that time there was a lot written in the **Main Deck** about it, we were having a real struggle. And we never did win it completely, because there were so many small craft unions. It was a series of small craft unions at that time . . . Machinists, this, that, everything, every department was a different union. And they tried to form a Federation and I don't think they ever really made it. But it should have been.

**S.D:** How did you move from one union to another?

**J.R:** Oh, I just transferred, they always transferred you. You had to be a member of the union to work. And at that time you didn't stand in line, they needed your labour, so you automatically signed in on whichever union was in the department you were working in. They had to take you.

**S.D:** In that period of time during the War there were some real struggles going on among different unions; among the labour federation, the CCL and the Boilermakers. Were you involved in any of that?

## Industrial unions vs. craft unions

**J.R:** I wasn't involved personally, but I was involved in talking about it and reading about it and arguing about it, because the Boilermakers Union wanted to form a Federation — the question of industrial unions against craft unions. And at that time the dream was to industrialize — and the CIO was at that time before they affiliated, from the girls in the office right down to the riveter — it would have been one industrial union, instead of all those little craft unions. Some of those were old, old unionists, and they felt that they were . . . it was hurting their jurisdiction, and they had some things on their side too, that it was an industry that they were working

within, it was quite complicated, and I don't remember all the ins and outs of their discussion now, I don't know how I can, it was 35 years ago. But oh yeah, we talked about it, and we argued this way and that way, and for the first time started thinking about it for the first time in our life, you know, but I certainly wasn't involved ever, I was never a shop steward, I just worked and had my little column. I just loved working in the shipyards because I met everybody and to me it was a release from being almost servitude to a marriage which was no good and too young and ready to go.



**Jonnie Rankin, shipyard worker, organizer labour activist and writer.**

**S.D:** What were the other women like who worked there? Were most of them in the same position as you: they came into the yards needing money and they . . .

**J.R:** Yeah, that's it, most people worked because they needed a job. Mostly they were just people, and they were from all over. You know, people could start getting their stove fixed. I fixed my kitchen. I lived in this awful kitchen with the clothes dripping over my head, and I finally got enough money to remodel my kitchen and I talked about this damn kitchen every day where we used to have coffee in the Sugar Bowl, a little place in North Vancouver. And every day I bored everybody to death about this kitchen. Thank God (for) this kitchen that I was rebuilding and I had some money, and even on those wages in those days, it was a wage, and I know one fella, was an oldtime leftwinger, called me bourgeois, I didn't even know what bourgeois meant but I didn't like the sound of it.

**S.D:** Because you were fixing your kitchen?

**J.R:** Because I was fixing my kitchen. And I really went after him, I said, "I work for this money, I live in that kitchen and I cook and I have a right to a nice kitchen." Then he was always telling me about, this is a funny thing, about the Soviet women. The Soviet women as far as he was concerned

was always in love with a tank as far as I could see. The Soviet women this, and the Soviet women that. And I used to wear these awful overalls, and so I used to put a big ribbon over the top of my hat, because it was more feminine, and so he used to call me frivolous because I wore this ribbon, bow, on my hat. And to sort of doll up this overall a little bit — I was only 25 years old, and I didn't feel like any man just because I was working. So anyways, he was always telling me about Soviet women fighting on the Front, which they did and organizing the factories and everything else, but they were never frivolous according to him.

**S.D:** They did not wear ribbons on their hats.

## Meeting Soviet women: Giving lessons in the pincurl

**J.R:** No, no, no. No, no. They were much more dedicated than I was. And they were . . . and kitchens were immaterial. So one day, we were all standing there and they bring in a Soviet ship. They had dug this thing up from out of the North Sea, and the whole crew was bringing it in, there was a lot of women on this boat. And we were, I guess, maybe six or eight feet apart. We were all hanging onto the decks staring at each other. We were on our side and they're on their side. Everybody's staring at each other and all of a sudden the women would come up and they'd all have these fancy kerchiefs, suddenly putting them on their hair and I said, "Do you notice the fancy kerchiefs comin' up on deck on women's hair?" I said, "Maybe they aren't so much in love with the tanks after all."

And when I was down in the ladies' toilet I used to go punch in and finish my hair and dressing. And, I was taking pincurls out of my hair, with bobbie pins, and this woman was there, about 4 or 5 of this Soviet crew were down there and they were watching me and they kind of had perms but they looked frizzy; they weren't set. So she asked me, this woman knew a few words of English, and I said, "Bobbie pin", and I showed her the one curl I knew how to make. So we went at lunchtime and I was giving them lessons on the pincurl and it turned out that this woman was the doctor on the ship. She learned English quite well and I used to talk to her a lot about things, and I asked her one day about the children, there were a lot of children on this boat, and she said — it was '43 or '44 at that time — that there were so many bombings that they just had to pick up the children, the orphans, and put them on farms, or behind the Urals, or on boats, or anywhere where they could keep them until they could find places for them, they just . . . they just picked up the kids and put them through the convoys on the boats and so on. They had a school there, she was a really fine woman, and she learned English pretty well in the time she was there. And we got quite friendly with them, back and forth, with our boats so close. □